

October 11, 2026
Luke 17:11-19

Thanksgiving Sunday
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Habits of Gratitude”

“Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

Long before I became a pastor, I was known in my hometown as a paperboy. I delivered the Courier-News for over six years and had a large route filled with very loyal customers. Every day after school, I would fill my bag with the day’s paper and walk my route, delivering to single-family homes, apartment buildings, and businesses along Route 22. I became so proficient at this work that I was named Newspaper Carrier of the Year and was privileged to meet the governor of New Jersey; I also received a scholarship that helped pay a major portion of my university tuition. Long after I gave up my route, many people in my neighbourhood remembered seeing me walking down the street, folding and delivering the day’s news.

Practically everyone in my neighbourhood was one of my customers – with one notable exception. Mr. Coddington, who lived in the middle of a block in which all of the other houses received the Courier-News every day, was not a home to which I delivered the newspaper. It wasn’t that he did not want to know what was happening in the world; he preferred to walk to the corner store every day and buy the newspaper on his own. I would often see him walking back with a copy of the paper under his arm, but at first, I did not ask him why he would not let me save him the trip and deliver it to his doorstep. This mystery continued until one day when I was walking my route Mr. Coddington was walking back to his house with the Courier-News under his arm. While I still found his insistence on buying the paper himself strange, I still did not feel comfortable confronting him about this. But on this day, instead of simply trading “hellos,” Mr. Coddington stopped and asked me, “You’re probably wondering why I don’t let you deliver the paper to my house?” While I had chosen not to say anything, since he asked I answered, “Yes, I don’t know why you don’t let me save you the walk to the store, since I walk right by your house every day!” His response cleared up this mystery: “It has nothing to do with you; everyone thinks you’re a fine paperboy. I choose to walk to the store because it’s a good habit for me; it gets me out of the house, gives me exercise, and I get a chance to see people every day. It’s a habit that is good for me in many ways.”

Mr. Coddington's daily walk for the newspaper was a habit he had chosen for the best reason: to improve both his physical and emotional health. He had developed a habit which may be defined as *"a repeated action that becomes an automatic behaviour, with little or no thought ... these routine behaviours are formed by a process called habituation. That means your brain gets better at performing a specific action over time."* (Brown University Health). Many habits are good and promote good health and practices that can enhance one's life; other habits such as smoking, excessive drinking, and lack of physical activity can be detrimental to one's health and quality of life. Developing good habits is important in areas such as our occupations, the lives of students in developing good study habits, the lives of artists and musicians in disciplining their lives in developing their gifts, and in athletics where the habit of training and self-care is critical for one's success. In the words of Aristotle, *"we are what we do repeatedly. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit."*

As we gather on this Sunday when Canadians are called to give thanks for the goodness of creation and all that we enjoy in this land we call home, we are reminded that giving thanks is central to the lives of all Christians. Paul calls upon us to *"give thanks without ceasing"* (1 Thessalonians 5:18), and the psalmist calls upon God's people to *"enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise"* (Psalm 100:4). As we gather at the Lord's Table, we are reminded that *"indeed right, our duty and our joy, that we should at all times and in all places give thanks and praise to you, almighty and merciful God, through our Saviour Jesus Christ"* (ELW Holy Communion) and Martin Luther calls us to see that *"God makes the wheat grow, and we should praise him and thank him for that."* (Luther's Works 14:22). Giving thanks is a lesson we teach our children – from saying "please" and "thank you" to writing thank you notes – so that they might develop **habits of gratitude** that will teach them to be grateful, develop gratitude as a life habit, and open their hearts to the generosity and kindness of others as well as the graciousness and mercy of God.

- "Gratitude is more than just an emotion. It is also a disposition that can be chosen and cultivated, an outlook toward life that manifests itself in actions – it is an ethic. Gratitude involves not only what we feel, but also what we do ... Like love, gratitude multiplies through giving and receiving. Both love and gratitude can become far more than ephemeral emotions – with practice, they become habits." – Diana Butler Bass

An example of a person who had developed a habit of gratitude can be seen in today's Gospel lesson from Luke, in which Jesus is continuing his journey to Jerusalem that is a major motif in this Gospel: *"On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus was*

going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.” (Luke 17:11). While Galilee was the familiar homeland of our Saviour, Samaria was a place most of his people would have avoided due to the well-established animosity between the two peoples (“*Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans*” – John 4:9), Jesus’ proximity to Samaria becomes important when “*as he entered a village, ten lepers approached him.*” Leprosy was a skin disease that was both physically and socially devastating. While the modern definition of leprosy refers to a specific condition also known as Hansen’s Disease, in biblical times leprosy included a variety of skin conditions, including psoriasis. Because it was believed to be highly contagious, the Torah dictated that a person with a leprous disease was required to live “outside the camp” and to cry out “unclean, unclean” whenever anyone approached as a warning:

- “Command the Israelites to put out of the camp anyone who is leprous, or has a discharge, and everyone who is unclean through contact with a corpse; you shall put out both male and female, putting them outside the camp; they must not defile the camp, where I dwell among them.” – Numbers 5:2-3.
- “The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be dishevelled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.” – Leviticus 13:45-46.

If a leper was fortunate enough to recover, a priest had to certify that the person was clean before he or she could return to the community, which explains the instruction Jesus gives the persons with leprosy who cry out to him “*Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!*” (17:13). The call for mercy would ordinarily have been a call for alms, but because news had spread about Jesus’ healings it is possible that the request for mercy could be understood as a request for healing. (“*But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and be cured of their diseases.*” – 5:15).

Luke reports that Jesus “*saw them*” (17:14), which in this context means far more than mere physical sight; it means on the one hand perceiving the opportunity to be merciful toward another, and on the other hand the recognition that God’s mercy has touched one’s life (“*When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*” – Matthew 9:36). Jesus instruction to them in response to their cry for mercy was in obedience to the command of the Torah: “*Go and show yourselves to the priests.*” They obey Jesus’ command, “*and as they went, they were made clean.*” The healing of their

disease occurs in their act of obedience: *“Jesus treats them as already healed, and in their act of obedient faith their healing takes place.”* (Fred Craddock).

The healing of persons with leprosy functions in the Gospel as a sign of the power of God’s kingdom present in Jesus. Jesus’ address in Nazareth recalls the healing of Naaman the Syrian in 2 Kings, and his healing of persons with this disease is also reported in Luke 5:

- “So [Naaman] went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of god; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.” – 2 Kings 5:14.
- “There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” – Luke 4:27.
- “Once, when he was in one of the cities, there was a man who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he bowed his face to the ground and begged him, ‘Lord if you choose, you can make me clean.’ Then Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, ‘I do choose. Be made clean.’ Immediately his leprosy left him.” – Luke 5:12-13.

In the healing of the ten lepers, the point of the story is not only the ability of Jesus to heal persons with this disease but the response of those who were touched by God’s mercy. While the majority of those who had been cleansed of their leprosy follow both the dictates of the Torah and the command of Jesus to show themselves to the priests so that their healing might be certified, one of the ten, *“when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him.”* (17:15-16a). His actions parallel that of Naaman (*“Then he returned to the man of God, and he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, ‘Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant.’”* – 2 Kings 5:15). This person recognizes that God has acted through Jesus, and he offers praise to God. Glorifying God is a common response to the manifestations of god’s saving work in Luke:

- “The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.” – 2:20.
- “Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God. Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, ‘We have seen strange things today.’” – 5:25-26.

- “When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, ‘Certainly this man was innocent.’” – 23:47.

The Samaritan who has been cleansed of his leprosy “*prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him,*” underscoring the intensity of the event. In response, Jesus asks a series of three questions that reveal the central message of this story:

“*Were not ten made clean?*” – a reminder that ten were made clean, not only the one who returned.

“*But the other nine, where are they?*” – what does their failure to return praising God say about them? Were they so caught up in their good fortune that they failed to see God’s hand in their healing?

“*Was none found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?*” the gratitude of the Samaritan is highlighted by Jesus referring to him as “this foreigner.” The common disdain for Samaritans among Jesus’ people stands in sharp contrast to the Samaritan’s response to God in this healing narrative. The proper response to God’s saving mercy is not presumption that it is someone we deserve but “*untainted gratitude and pure praise of God for God’s saving mercy.*” (Alan Culpepper).

After asking these questions, Jesus turns to the man and invites him to “*get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.*” (17:19), a phrase that is found elsewhere in Luke’s Gospel:

- “And he said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’” – 7:50.
- “He said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.’” – 8:48.
- “Jesus said to him, ‘Receive your sight; your faith has saved you.’” – 18:42.

The Samaritan’s faith was not expressed by his request for help but by his gratitude and praise of God. The other nine were healed, but only this one received Jesus’ declaration of salvation; “*they got what they wanted, but this one received more than he dreamed of asking for.*” (Culpepper).

The story of the cleansing of the ten lepers is often selected for our celebration of Thanksgiving Sunday, the day when we gather to give thanks to God for the abundant harvest that our Lord has given to us. We acknowledge that “*all good gifts around us are sent from heaven above; we thank you Lord, we thank you Lord for all your love.*” We remember the words of Martin Luther from the *Small Catechism* that God shows all the gifts of creation upon us “*out of pure, fatherly, and divine*

goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all! For all this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true."

The Samaritan who returns to give thanks to Jesus is held up on this day as an example of the thankfulness we should all bring to God for the blessings we have received; but what is unclear is why he returns to give thanks when the others continue on their journey to the priest? After all, they are walking in obedience to Jesus' instructions as well as the dictates of the Torah; they are not doing any wrong by their actions. While it is not clearly spelled out, it may be that the Samaritan had made gratitude such a central part of his life that he had developed the habit of gratitude, giving thanks for a blessing received without even having to stop and think about it. The Samaritan had been able to make gratitude a natural part of his very being, so it was natural for him to return and give thanks for the blessing he had received, recognizing that its origin was in God who desires all people to live in the wholeness and abundance that are God's will for all God's children.

- "Faith, like gratitude, is our response to the grace of God as we have experienced it. For those who have become aware of God's grace, all of life is infused with a sense of gratitude, and each encounter becomes an opportunity to see and to respond in the spirit of the grateful leper." – Culpepper.

After my conversation with Mr. Coddington, I no longer felt bad that he was not one of the customers on my paper route. He had developed a healthy habit that involved walking to the store for the Courier-News that gave him exercise and allowed him to socialize with friends and neighbours. Such healthy habits can not only improve the quality of our lives but expose us to opportunities and experiences we never would have known existed otherwise. When we develop habits of gratitude in which we make giving thanks a regular part of our lives, we also open ourselves to the blessings that surround us and that God showers upon us every day. We can see that even in the most challenging of circumstances we can still give thanks, making a joyful noise because "*the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his mercies to all generations!*" (Psalm 100:5).

Amen.